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TAGS: PREL PGOV EFIN ETTC SY LE IZ
SUBJECT: SARG PRESSURE POINTS IN CURRENT LEBANESE CRISIS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary: As Washington assesses options for pressuring Syria on its Lebanon policy, Post suggests six possible measures for consideration. We believe Syria is vulnerable to a PD focus on the Shia/Iran aspect of Syria's support for Hizballah. Immediate designations of additional Syrians under E.O. 13460 as a follow up to the Rami Makhluf designation would send a strong signal and likely resonate with the Syrian public. Emphasis on the Lebanon Tribunal and acceleration of its implementation would focus Syrian regime figures on possible exposure to prosecution and embarrassment for the regime. We believe Syrian economic vulnerabilities are a source of pressure, and we may be able to influence Syria's efforts to establish better trade relations with Iraq. Syria cares about its relationships with Turkey, the UAE, Kuwait, and India, and we should pressure these countries to cancel planned trips by Bashar and deliver a strong message on Lebanon. Coordinated action with European countries will signal continuing isolation; EU countries publicly criticize Syria on human rights practices, and we should seek to tie this to Lebanon by stressing some Syrian dissidents are in jail for advocating support of the Cedar Revolution. End Summary

¶2. (C) As Washington focuses on means to pressure the SARG over it's Lebanon policy, we offer the following six specific areas that we see as having the most impact on current SARG thinking. The SARG is reassessing its position on Lebanon and timely actions on some or all of the following areas may have a tangible effect. The six areas are:

-- Use PD tools to emphasize the Shia/Iranian aspect of Syrian support for Hizballah.

-- Move quickly on designating Mohamed Hamsho and others under E.O. 13460: the time to move is now.

-- Emphasize the UN International Independent Investigation Commission (UNIIC) on Lebanon and accelerate implementation.

-- Focus on Syria's current economic vulnerability, perhaps by pressuring Iraqis to reject economic cooperation absent far greater security cooperation from Syria.

-- Send messages through countries with strong influence on Syria: Turkey, UAE, Kuwait and India. Tell UAE, Kuwait and India to cancel Bashar's plans for June visits.

-- Increase EU pressure on human rights abuses in Damascus by playing up Syrian activists who are in jail because of their expression of support for March 14.

Emphasizing Syria's Iran/Shia Collusion

¶3. (C) While being careful to avoid crossing the line into encouraging sectarianism, Post strongly urges more focus on Syria's close relationship with Iran and Hizballah as Shia focused on attacking the Arab world. We believe talking points should emphasize IRGC's material support for Hizballah's violent attacks on Arabs. The message that Syria is simply doing the bidding of Shia Iran will tarnish Bashar's image domestically and in the Arab world and complicate his attempts to portray himself as a "Sunni" Arab leader. Syria's refusal to constructively participate in the Arab League's mission in Lebanon (even though Syria is titular President of the Arab League this year) also provides a vulnerability for PD exploitation. These themes would strengthen Egypt and Saudi Arabia's own messages on these subjects.

E.O. 13460: The Time is Now

¶4. (C) The February 2008 designation of Rami Makhluf under E.O. 13460 generated significant reaction in Syria. Immediate designation of Mohammed Hamsho, closely followed by black market moneychanger Zuhair Sahloul (abu Shawfiq), among other regime bagmen, would resonate both within Asad's inner circle as well as on the Syrian street. This action would send a message that the U.S. can and will focus direct pressure on prominent Syrian individuals associated with SARG policies.

The Special Tribunal

¶5. (C) Perhaps somewhat exaggerated, opposition and civil society contacts stress that the UNIIC investigation into the Hariri assassination still "terrifies" the regime. Nonetheless, the SARG remains concerned with defending its image against the negative press associated with allegations of assassinating a Sunni leader. Efforts to accelerate the tribunal's investigation and begin the prosecutor phase would send a strong signal to the regime that it could come under international pressure to cooperate much sooner than it had assumed.

Exploiting Economic Vulnerabilities: Iraq

¶6. (C) Syria's greatest vulnerability currently is economic. We see few levers to pressure the Syrians, since the Europeans and others are extremely hesitant to invest now, and Syria has no relationships with international financial institutions (IFIs). The one area in which we might have some influence is Syria's attempt to improve its economic circumstances by cooperating with Iraq. As Syria's economic woes have magnified in recent weeks, Syrian officials are aggressively trying to accelerate trade and oil deals with Iraq. We have heard reports that the Syrians intend to discuss the Akkas deal, as well as the Kirkuk-Banyas pipeline

renovation project, with an Iraqi delegation led by GOI Minister of Trade Abdulfalah Sudani, vaguely scheduled sometime this month. The Syrians believe the GOI wants to discuss transportation routes for food, primarily, from Syrian ports to western and northern Iraq. This conference will be a preparatory meeting before the Higher Syrian-Iraqi Cooperation Committee meets in Damascus in late May or early June, which is expected to be chaired by the Prime Ministers of both countries. Absent greater security cooperation by the SARG, a subject which has seen no progress, the GOI might be encouraged to deflect these Syrian overtures and even postpone the Committee meetings indefinitely.

Relationships That Matter to Syria

17. (C) Syria has dedicated time and prestige to deepening its economic and diplomatic relationship with Turkey, and Turkey is now intricately involved in facilitating indirect talks between Syria and Israel. Turkey has expressed its unhappiness to Bashar over Lebanon and may be encouraged to do more to counter Iranian gains. We understand that Bashar's pending trip to the Gulf and North Africa is definitely on, with Bashar having reached agreement with the UAE for a June 10-11 visit. Syria is seeking dates for a stop in Kuwait after a reportedly fixed June 16-17 trip to India. We should reach out to all three of these countries and ask them, in view of the situation in Lebanon, to consider canceling their invitations to Bashar.

Tapping Into European Focus on Human Rights

18. (C) The 2006 Beirut-Damascus declaration forged solidarity between Lebanese and Syrian civil society leaders and led to the SARG's arrest of several Syrian activists for a statement that called on Syria to end its interference in Lebanon. We believe we can play up this Lebanon angle by approaching the EU and most European countries to continue efforts to pressure the Syrian regime on its human rights abuses. Encouraging the Europeans to raise the cases of dissidents such as Riad Seif (married to a German), and Anwar al-Bunni (a Syrian leader behind the Beirut-Damascus Declaration) might offer a way to signal unified U.S.-EU pressure. Bunni in particular is important to EU countries as the founder and director of the ill-fated, EU-funded Civil Society Training Center, which the SARG forcibly closed just eight days after it opened in April 2006. (Bunni has been in prison since May 2006.)

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CORBIN